GOD OF CREATION

The First in an Advent Series of Sermons

November 27, 1988

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31
John 1:1-5

"The Word was in the beginning with God, all things were made through the Word..." -John 1:2-3

The story is told of the young minister, fresh out of the seminary. She was having a lot of trouble with her preaching. Sermon preparation was difficult, particularly the matter of choosing topics. So she made an appointment with a seasoned veteran of the pulpit and asked, "What shall I preach about?" He answered: "Preach about God and preach about twenty minutes."

This is an Advent series about God. I'm not sure I can make firm promises about the twenty minute part... but I know I can count on your Christmas generosity. We will think about God...

God of the Creation
God of the Outsiders
God of the Lost
God of us All...

There are two important questions -

Is there a God, a supreme being?

- and -

Does it matter?

The first question is academic. It has compelled the best thinking of the human race from the beginning of time.

The second question becomes quickly personal. It is not at all academic.

Paul Tillich, one of the best theological thinkers of this or any era defined faith as "ultimate concern." One time after a lecture, an elderly gentleman approached and said, "Professor Tillich, what I really want to know is whether the ultimate is concerned about me."

That really is the question, isn't it? Does God exist - and does it have anything to do with me?

This sermon intends to explore both of those questions, and in fact, to treat them, finally, as one and the same.

The question comes at us from a number of different directions and is asked in a variety of ways...

One of the most common is when we suddenly sense our own smallness in relation to the natural order; when, for instance, we engage in star-gazing.

One of the important things to do at the ocean is go down to the deck an hour after the sun sets on a moonless evening, lie on a blanket looking up at the sky and watch the stars come out. It's a favorite past time of ours, almost a religious ritual. Perhaps you've seen the television commercial recently... It is irreverently funny... and I probably shouldn't be using it as a sermon illustration. It is a picture of a sky full of stars. The voice over says something like: "Looking up into the starry sky has always prompted us to ask important questions, like, 'Who are we? Where are we going? And, will there be Michelob Light when we get there?'"

The premise, at least, is right. Looking at the stars moves us in the direction of important questions. I'll not forget one of my youngsters, as we were lying on our backs looking asking me, "Dad, where do we go when we die?"

In a John Updike short story, a young naval officer reflects on the "devastating impression the black firmament of spattered stars made when seen from the flight deck of an aircraft carrier in the middle of the Pacific. How little, little to the point of nothingness, he was beneath those stars! Even the great ship, The Enterprise, that held him a tall building's height above the all-swallowing ocean was reduced to the size of a pinpoint in such a perspective. As far as he could reason, religion begins with this strangeness. [Made in Heaven, Trust Me, p. 195]

Religion begins with star-gazing or something akin to it. Religion began and life was forever changed for a group of shepherds tending their flocks at night time, 2,000 years ago: Out of the starry sky something shined on them which they called the "glory of the Lord." Religion began for those strange, wise astrologers, when they discovered, observed and then set out in pursuit of a new star on the horizon. The first step toward faith for Updike's young naval officer began as he looks up into the fathomless mystery of a night sky in the middle of the Pacific.

The "mysterium tremendium" Rudolf Otto called it in his classic study, The Idea of the Holy. Religion begins when we perceive the

impenetrable mystery behind the created order. Sometimes that can happen without warning, when your eye falls on the breathtaking beauty of a mountain side aflame with October color, or when the passionate truth of great music speaks to your heart, or when you see a newborn child and feel the incredible power of the life force within the whole human race, or when you recall the sweetness and ecstasy of love given and received; and frequently it happens when you raise your eyes to the sky.

"O Lord, our Lord
how majestic is thy name in all
the earth!
When I look at thy heavens, the work
of thy fingers,
the moon and stars which thou
hast established,
what is man that thou art mindful
of him,
and the son of man that thou dost
care for him?
O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy
name in all the earth."

Religion begins star-gazing.

It is intriguing that the scientists, the astronomers, astrophysicists, and mathematicians who look at the heavens and the stars with incredible sophistication and precision seem to know and to echo the reverence of the Psalmist. One of this year's most fascinating books was A Brief History of Time, by Stephen Hawking. Hawking is a 46 year-old British astrophysicist who has Lou Gehrig's disease, is confined to his wheelchair, communicates by way of computer which responds to the touch of his fingers and who is generally acknowledged to be one of the half dozen most brilliant minds of our time. The book's subtitle is "From the Big Bang to Black Holes," and it is Hawking's effort to put into something resembling ordinary language, the fantastic discoveries, concepts and hypotheses of astrophysics. It is about creation, that is to say: how, when and inevitably, who?

It is a remarkable book. Carl Sagan wrote the introduction and said, "This is a book about God... Hawking is attempting, as he explicitly states, to understand the mind of God." Hawking explains what the Big Bang was, that moment before which there was nothing and after which our universe began. He is bold enough to write about that very second, when the universe was zero size and infinitely hot and the next 100 seconds when the temperature declined and protons and neutrons began to combine to produce the nuclei of atoms. Hawking observed that the laws of science contain many fundamental numbers - like the size of the electric charge of the electron, and that "the value of these numbers seem to be very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life."

He paraphrases the eighth Psalm by explaining that "the earth is a medium sized planet orbiting around an average star in the outer suburbs of an ordinary spiral galaxy, which is itself only one of about a million million galaxies in the observable universe." [p. 126]

And then this remarkable testimony. "It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us." [p. 127]

The remarkable thing about Hawking's book is that not very long ago, everyone assumed that religion and science were incompatible: that when one moved from star-gazing as a pleasurable activity to star-gazing as a serious scientific pursuit, religion was going to be the casualty. The sad truth is that religion and science have been adversaries frequently enough that each came to be suspicious if not hostile to the other. Copernicus was so afraid of the church that he didn't make public his evidence that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa. Biblical literalists have been opposing objective scientific truth for centuries and incredibly, are still at it. But when Stephen Hawking looks at the stars he sees the intentionality of the Creator.

Religion begins star-gazing. And, happily, the scientists and theologians are talking to each other again. Christian religion - Biblical religion - however, has more to do with the second question. Does it matter? Christian religion makes the most incredible assertion that the Creator - the one who was before there was a universe, the one in whose mind the universe was conceived - is the same one who came into our history in the life of a little Jewish baby in Bethlehem.

It's a connection easy to overlook in the exquisite beauty of the birth and in the cultural celebration. The birth is so charming, so adaptable to greeting cards and store windows - that it is easy to miss altogether its radical claim. That is why it is so important to hear the witness of the Fourth Gospel during Advent. Instead of a birth narrative, instead of telling again about shepherds and mangers and wise men, the Fourth Gospel begins - at the beginning. This writer lifts the first sentence of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible...

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and paraphrases...

"In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God... all things were made through the Word..." And later - "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The point? The same God who created the world - came into the world in Jesus. The Creator is also the Redeemer.

The news is not only interesting in an academic sense, it is deeply, profoundly and and personally good news.

In fact the Biblical account of creation is a theological affirmation, with very personal meanings, not a scientific description at all. The trouble starts as soon as someone tries to make it a scientific description. It doesn't work. It wasn't intended for that purpose. The only way to make it into science is to keep out real scientific evidence. The tragedy is that if you get drawn into that effort, you end up missing the stunning and radical theology the creation accounts contain.

The creation accounts were not written as an answer to the question, "How did we get here?" but "Why are we here? Does God care that we are here? Does God even know that we are here?" We know that they were written when Israel was in exile, depressed, out of hope; looking at extinction; not only death, but the end of the promise, the dream.

What Genesis says is that the Creator cares about the creation. The Creator creates with loving attention. The Creator respects and loves the creation. The Creator is committed to and will never abandon the creation.

What Genesis says is that this Creator is different: This God did not put things in motion and then retire to a corner of the universe to watch how it played out. This Creator stays involved, keeps on creating by fashioning men and women to bear the image and something of the love and will and courage and creativity of the Creator. What Genesis says is that God is engaged in an ongoing process of creation, still at it, still creating.

What a message that was to a depressed people languishing in exile! They had work to do, a responsibility to join God in the ongoing process of creating the world. They couldn't give up and die there in Babylonian exile. They had a reason for living. God cared about them, loved them, had plans for them.

God loves you. God has plans for you. God is still very much involved in creating the world. What a message that still is!

No life is without purpose and meaning and significance. That is Good News. That is Gospel.

That message gave hope and conviction and courage to Israel - and it can be Gospel for you. Regardless of what is happening, or not happening in your life. Regardless of the disappointments or failures; regardless of the fact that it feels like you're going nowhere and your life doesn't mean a thing to anyone. The Good News is that God created you, intends you, loves you and has high hopes for you.

That is a powerful word. There is no physician, nurse, psychiatrist or minister who has not personally witnessed the life giving power of a sense of purpose, or work to do. We have seen sick people overcome illness and live because there was work to do... It is a powerful word for all of us. Part of it is that God continues to create, continues to fashion the creation to reflect God's will. And so, particularly at this time, it is our special responsibility to remember that the job is not complete yet.

This God of the creation - this God whose image is in us all, black and white, red and yellow and brown - this God will not rest until all people live in peace. To worship this God is to renew the hope for peace and our commitment to it. And it is also to acknowledge our participation in systems that often do not make for peace although they may work for our comfort and well-being.

As we celebrate the redemption of the world, it is to know and lament the fact that our city is divided racially, now known by all as the most thoroughly segregated city in the land.

It is to know and lament that a growing part of the family is homeless and hungry. After years of sustained economic growth, we have many more people living in the corners and crevices of this church, on the benches and in the parks and alleys of our neighborhood than ever before.

It is to know and lament that what our nation produced last week at the cost of billions of dollars, is not better health care, or education or housing - but a new bomber.

Religion begins star-gazing. Our faith begins with the idea that there is a creator God in whose mind the universe was conceived, a God who created the human race to bear the divine image and to participate in the continuing process of creation. Religion begins with:

-the Psalmist, pondering the moon and stars
-the naval officer in the middle of the Pacific
-Stephen Hawking, from his wheel chair,
probing the mysteries of time
-or you and me, looking up into a night sky,
being overwhelmed by the countless stars, in the vast darkness...

That's the first idea.

The second is that on a dark night in Bethlehem of Judea a baby was born who was God's only Son, and whose star was a sign of God's endless love for the world and for men and women.

My hope is that, as we begin this lovely season of Advent, we might keep those two ideas together.

Black Poet James Weldon Johnson managed to capture the awe of creation and the intrinsic personal love of the Creator --

"Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that he had made.
He looked at his sun,
And he looked at his moon,
And he looked at his little stars;
He looked on his world
With all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.

"Then God sat down-
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought: I'll make a man:

"Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far
corner of the night,

"Who rounded the earth in the middle of
his hand;
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;
Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen."

That's what the Fourth Gospel means...

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God."

The Word is that...

The great God of creation loves us -

The great God of creation is still creating -

The great God of creation - has made us and has plans for us.

The Word is that the great God of creation has come among us - in a birth we will celebrate, and for which we prepare in the weeks ahead.

"The Word was made flesh."

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth."

Amen.